

Mauvaise Troupe Collective, *The ZAD and NoTAV: Territorial Struggles and the Making of a New Political Intelligence*

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MUTINOUS TERRITORY

The idea for a new French airport near Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a farming village some twelve miles northwest of Nantes, was originally floated in the late 1960s. Promoted by a regional bourgeoisie entranced by the modernization rhetoric of the post-war boom, it met immediate resistance from local farmers. Reasons for building the airport changed over the years—a touch-down point for Concorde, a third hub for the Greater Paris region, a real-estate bonanza for developers of Nantes' existing airport. Meanwhile, the re-classification of the six square-mile site as a *zone d'aménagement différencié*, or ZAD, for eminent-domain purposes, allowed the state's solicitors to purchase land from farmers willing to sell and, in a sort of expropriation by attrition, to wait for other landowners to die. Put on hold during the economic crises of the late 1970s and 80s, the airport plan was resurrected in 2000 under Jospin. It was given official go-ahead in 2008, in the teeth of local opposition. That spring an old farmer, chatting to some local squatters during an anti-airport demonstration in Nantes, proposed that they come and occupy one of the empty farmsteads in the zone.

Over the next decade, a permanent encampment of activists flourished on the land, fighting off the development attempts by the French construction giant, Vinci. The occupiers recast the bureaucratic acronym ZAD as *la zad*—*zone à défendre*. At its height, the *zad* contained a bakery, a radio station, a newspaper, a bar, a website, spaces for musical performances, several subsistence farms and a market where no money changed hands. Yet the movement against the airport was decades in the making and the occupation only a late-stage crystallization in a process of multiple, intersecting forms

of protest and organizing efforts that brought together farmers, squatters, anarchists, trade unionists, *nantais* citizens and elected local officials. It is more accurately described as a collective of organizations, ad hoc nature studies, investigative committees, farmworkers and other permanent residents, as well as members of the writing collective, Mauvaise Troupe.

In *ZAD and NoTAV*, the group pairs the experience of Notre-Dame-des-Landes with a parallel, ongoing struggle in Piedmont. The project for a high-speed train, or TAV—Italian: *treno ad alta velocità*—piercing the Alps between Lyon and Turin, was conceived by EU planners as part of Corridor Five, a mega-project for transport infrastructure that would arc from Lisbon to Kiev, to link the eastern and western flanks of the newly united continent. The TAV was scheduled to cut through the Val di Susa, running up from Turin to the French border—the route the Roman legions took into Gaul. Densely settled as it approaches Turin, studded with winter-sports resorts in its higher Alpine reaches, the Valley is a very different environment, geographically and socially, from the Loire-Atlantique—not least in its absorption through urban overspill of strains of Turin’s traditional worker militancy. Yet the NoTAV campaign that sprang into being here in the 1990s confronted a nearly identical problem to the *zad*’s: the construction of redundant infrastructure.

Just as Nantes is home to a perfectly functional airport, an existing train line already operates, often at half-capacity, between Lyon and Turin. A giant motorway was constructed here in the 1980s, spanning the Valley on huge concrete struts, though it already possessed two national roads. In the words of Gianluca, a NoTAV pirate-radio operator, this is a territory ‘midway between the mountains and the Turin periphery, even from the point of view of work—it must be the most industrialized, ruined, polluted, ravaged-by-infrastructure Alpine valley in all of Italy.’ As with the *zad*, the NoTAV movement developed into an unlikely alliance between resistant villagers, ranging from pious Catholics to middle-aged ex-Maoists, and the young Turin *autonomia* and squatter milieus—a collaboration between dramatically contrasting political cultures. A signature of the movement has been its huge popular demonstrations, 80,000-strong, with village banners, tractors and icons of the Madonna of Rocciamelone making their way past rocks daubed ‘TAV=Mafia’, a reference to the big Italian construction interests involved.

ZAD and NoTAV is an elegant attempt to give a comparative account of these two sited struggles and to elicit the lessons in ‘political intelligence’ that they suggest. Mauvaise Troupe has already produced two shorter books on the *zad* and an earlier compilation of stories and pictures from other alter-globo and anti-austerity struggle sites, mainly in France. Based on over a hundred interviews conducted in the Val Di Susa and Notre-Dame-

des-Landes in 2014–15, *ZAD and NoTAV* is an attractively written hybrid of amateur ethnography and reportage, buttressed by first-person accounts, opening out into a set of speculations on ‘the people’ and ‘the popular’, the relations between the different components of these ‘communities in struggle’, the uses and abuses of the territories involved, and the potential diffusion of such forms of resistance. It’s nicely translated here by Kristin Ross, American scholar of French history and literature, author of landmark works on Rimbaud, May 68 and the Paris Commune, and a supporter of the *zad* since she was invited there for a discussion on communal luxury. Her informative introduction sets the *zad* and NoTAV in the context of protest occupations from Japan’s Narita Airport and the Xingu River dam in Brazil to the Standing Rock Sioux’s resistance to the North Dakota Pipeline.

One of the many signs erected on the *zad* reads, ‘Against the Airport and its World’. With the establishment of a successful communal living arrangement, the possibility of an alternative took on a concrete form and the airport assumed a metonymic function in the thought-world of the occupiers. The attempt to register such an alternative makes for an odd book, resistant to summary. The opening section, criss-crossing between Brittany and Piedmont, provides an over-arching double narrative of the two. It is not easy, however, to disentangle the territory from the people, or the forms of protest—barricades, sabotage—from the logistics of occupation and defence, and these also resist division at the textual level. The book’s structure reflects the attempt to negotiate the untranslatable reality of a territory where the meaning of nature itself was undergoing many simultaneous transformations. The land chosen for the airport had been referred to as both a swamp and a desert by developers. As a result of political struggle, it was discovered that it was in fact a biodiverse wetland.

The proper designation of this muddy landscape is *bocage*, a borrowed word meaning ‘little woods’, the product of feudal property arrangements. Flat farming land, it is broken up by hedges, shrubs and clusters of trees that record a human footprint made by a pre-capitalist peasantry. It also memorializes the end of communal land usage in Brittany, for the hedgerows were instruments of enclosure. *Bocage* as an environmental designation thus contains a politically relevant history of land use—and it is land use, in several senses, that is documented and conceptualized in this text. The re-zoning of the area changed the landscape yet again. It is because much of it was taken out of use as farmland in the 1970s that the ZAD became such a rich site of biodiversity, while the surrounding areas fell prey to agricultural modernization. The construction company and its boosters in the regional government responded with a green-washing campaign. They promised an airport that would aim at ‘optimal integration with the landscape’. Single-storied and

covered with a ‘vegetalized’ roof, ‘the terminal will appear like a section of the bocage that rises up’.

To the authors’ delight, the *bocage*, in all its historical and natural density, did rise up. The Loire-Atlantique region was a stronghold of the French worker-farmers movement, Paysans travailleurs, that arose amid the broader upheavals of 1968, memorably theorized by local sharecropper Bernard Lambert, in *Les Paysans dans la lutte des classes* (1970). Lambert was one of the leaders of the farmers’ march to occupy the Larzac plateau and celebrated its ‘marriage’ with the ongoing occupation of the Lip watch factory as an alliance of rural and urban proletariats. The Confederation Paysanne, a radical union of agricultural workers that emerged from this tradition in the late 1980s, would provide crucial support to the struggle against the airport when the project was resuscitated in 2000. It was joined by a local citizens’ association, ACIPA, and an umbrella organization known as the Coordination that brought together over fifty groups opposed to the project.

From the beginning, the campaign exceeded a stereotypically rural conservatism. Like most infrastructure projects, the airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes had been sold as a great economic boon to local inhabitants. Early activism positioned itself against the economized world of the airport rather than in defence of tradition and, to that end, began a series of counter-investigations to show that the airport would do more than eliminate farms. Local shopkeepers and café owners hoped to profit from increased traffic to the region, so activists travelled to Roissy to record the noise levels at Charles de Gaulle Airport and interview people who lived and worked in its vicinity: ‘We were able to show that the corner café had closed because passengers went to the airport café and the village was dead.’

In the Val di Susa, too, resistance began with environmental-impact studies. These were conducted by a local group called Habitat, which could draw on expertise from the University of Turin and had already organized against an arms factory sited in its village. Habitat likewise recorded the noise of high-speed trains and investigated the problems with asbestos in the mountain-sides through which the TAV construction engineers would be drilling. It produced a mass of popular educational material to take round the villages. The Valley’s previous experiences with large-scale infrastructure projects also underwrote its definitive ‘no’ to the TAV. In the 1980s, villagers had been taken in by false promises that the motorway would be ‘ecological’ and provide local jobs, which failed to materialize. A few years later, they organized successfully against the construction of a 400,000-volt overhead power-line that would have connected the Valley to the Superphénix nuclear reactor in France. The Valsusians had refused to allow local politicians to

take over the leadership of that campaign. ‘We delegated nothing’, a 69-year-old villager recalled. ‘They were free to come with us, but we had direct control. It was the right way to go about things and in the end we won.’

Villagers cited the power-line victory as the model for NoTAV, whose basic unit has been the village-level *comitato di lotta popolare*. The terminology of popular struggle reflects the militant recent past in the region: a dozen members of Prima Linea were arrested there in the 1970s. But Mauvaise Troupe emphasizes intimate and immediate concerns as the main point of departure for the radical NoTAV movement. Stefano, a 57-year-old member of the Bussaleno popular struggle committee, put it this way:

I was a political militant, I spent eight years in prison. But I’m from here, I love nature—ecologist is not the right word but yes, I’m connected with nature. The TAV bothers me personally . . . It’s not because it represents capital and I’m a communist I’m against it. No. It’s because it devastates the valley for me, it surrounds me with asbestos, it’s disgusting, and I’m fighting it for those reasons.

But intimacy, immediacy and personal interest should not be confused with a necessarily apolitical position. One of the virtues of this testimony is its demonstration of the porousness of the personal and the political. The accounts of the participants makes it clear that ‘those reasons’ frequently gave way to broader ideological investments. Likewise, quotidian forms of activism such as committee membership and peaceful protest were often transformed through confrontations with police violence or by increased first-hand knowledge into a militant opposition. It would be wildly inaccurate to describe the account of these movements conveyed in *ZAD and NoTAV* as ‘not ideological’, but the coupling of first-hand accounts with explanatory text does effectively demonstrate a politics in process constituted by individual participants, rather than a political programme formulated in advance. It models many different ways into a robust, participatory politics.

Jasmin’s account is a good illustration. She arrived at the *zad* as ‘more of a naturalist than a militant’, with the intention of making an inventory of wildlife and a map of the area. As media attention increased, more naturalists arrived to study the flora and fauna of the *bocage*. Eventually they formed a group, Naturalists in Struggle. Like many components of the *zad* and the larger anti-airport campaign, it was at once a satellite of long-standing naturalist organizations in the region and something new—qualitatively altered by the context of the battle. As Jasmin put it, this was ‘the first time that we were exercising our passion in the framework of a struggle’. She ended up living on the *zad* for two years, during which time she led botanical tours. The *zad* didn’t simply supply an invigorating framework for the naturalists’

endeavours. Their inventories identified rare species that were dependent on its unique habitat. This allowed for legal claims, as well as a more developed critique of the airport company's green-washing. Mauvaise Troupe notes the 'glaring contradiction' of the Hollande government's promotion of a new airport while at the same time 'bragging about hosting the world-wide climate summit'. The naturalists took issue with the very idea of 'environmental compensation' and, with record-keeping that would appear apolitical in any other context, provided a detailed material argument against 'the conversion of biodiversity into a monetary value'.

Years of diligent legal protests and alternative studies organized by Coordination and ACIPA having failed to block the onset of construction works, resistance took a more militant turn. With the call by tenant farmers, local protesters—*les habitant.e.s qui résistent*—and squatters for a full-scale occupation, the non-negotiable 'no' of the anti-airport activists was given a concrete form. In the summer of 2009, radical anti-capitalist ecologists and degrowth militants organized a Climate Action Camp in the *zad*, while the *habitant.e.s* called for more occupiers to come and build dwellings there. In 2011, *zadistes* toured urban squatting scenes, calling for more support. The historic presence of the worker-farmer movement was highly visible in the tractors that now functioned as movable barricades against the police and construction crews. Access roads were constantly guarded.

There were continuous skirmishes between occupiers and the company's subcontractors. Militants targeted the equipment of Biotope, the 'green-washing mercenaries' hired by the developers. Shoyu, a member of a vegan cookery collective, describes how the masked occupiers repeatedly sabotaged Biotope's collection of soil samples, stole their paperwork and slashed their vehicles' tyres. The regional media attacked the 'riff-raff' living on the site, with some backing from Green Party members. Trials of some of the activists began in Nantes, countered by a 10,000-strong anti-airport demonstration, flanked by 200 tractors. The territory itself was re-shaped by defensive considerations. As *ZAD and NoTAV* explains, the first dwellings built on the *zad* were 'strewn across the zone without any logical coherence, making a collective defence difficult to imagine'. The occupiers now began to think strategically about the space as they considered how best to prepare for the police—mapping the area, testing communications systems. Characteristically, this had a whimsical aspect. One occupier describes the planning of a garden in terms of resisting eviction: 'We put barbed wire across the rear entry points, we tried to lay out the plantings so that the first things to be destroyed would not be the tomatoes.'

In October 2012 the Préfecture launched Operation Caesar, aiming to raze the *zad* with the help of bulldozers and 1,200 riot police. Outside

supporters rushed to the site; farmers opened their homes. *ZAD and NoTAV* gives a vivid account of the epic battles during those weeks: farmers threw up barricades of telegraph poles and hay bales to halt the police advance as temporary dwellings and vegetable gardens were bulldozed and heavy armoured vehicles sank in the mud. New dwellings were hastily built, the copse ‘ringing with the sound of hammers’. Police occupied the crossroads at the main entrance to the site all through the winter. When they finally withdrew in the spring of 2014, there was an explosion of activity on the *zad*—a new influx of occupiers, plantings, mass events. When the developers tried to start exploratory drilling work again the following year, a demonstration of 60,000, including five hundred tractors, took over the centre of Nantes. Construction of the airport was indefinitely postponed, pending legal appeals, although there would be further attempts at eviction.

In Val di Susa, exploratory vertical drilling for the TAV tunnel began in the late 1990s, despite the local protests. Soon after, nocturnal sabotage attacks commenced against the company’s equipment, accompanied by ‘obscure’ graffiti—an odd mix of anti-capitalism and racism—that to the villagers suggested provocateurs. A little later, three anarchists were arrested in a Turin squat, accused of the attacks and charged with ‘terrorist aims’. Held in solitary confinement, one was found dead in his cell; another killed herself a few months later. Mauvaise Troupe argues that the alliances between Turin’s radical youth milieu and the NoTAV movement intensified after their deaths: ‘the valley demonstrated in the city’, and summer camps in the mountains introduced the city’s young to the valley’s struggle. In 2003, the company began setting up sites to extract soil samples, endowing the project with a visible reality. But legibility is double-edged and opponents now had a target. Tens of thousands marched against the drilling sites, broke in and occupied them. In 2005, the protesters occupying a new site in a field above the valley established a permanent encampment—a *presidio*, or garrison. Patrizia, a 57-year-old cook: ‘The first morning we just had a few seats and a picnic table. The next day we had an umbrella and two tents’—and ‘little by little’, a wooden mountain hut.

That October, protesters confronted riot police on a bridge over a waterfall, high up the mountain. Nicoletta, a 69-year-old member of the Bussoleno popular struggle committee:

There were just a hundred of us—we were sandwiched. The police had taken down the railings of the bridge and the waterfall was a few metres below us. They could have killed us. But a miracle happened and we began to see lights arriving from all sides of the mountain. The hundred of us stood our ground, and then . . . the whole mountain came alive, with people coming to join us. In an instant there were a thousand of us and things looked a bit different!

The stand-off at Seghino Bridge was followed by a valley-wide insurrection in December 2005, when word went round that construction work was starting at Venaus, high up by the French border. Riot police demolished the NoTAV *presidio* in the middle of a snowy night, clubbing the fifty occupiers. By dawn, there were church bells ringing, firemen sounding their sirens, municipal police using their cars' loudspeakers to rally against the *carabinieri*. Mauvaise Troupe detail the spontaneous general strike that brought schoolchildren as much as shopkeepers out into the streets, protesters throwing up barricades across the motorway, the 70,000-strong march that chased the *carabinieri* from the construction site. With the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics fast approaching, the Berlusconi government called a temporary halt to TAV construction that would last for the next four years.

Collectively authored, unsure of its tense, at once polemical and documentary, *ZAD and NoTAV* is an odd book, but in its own way compelling for just that reason. As an attempt to write a comparative, subjectively informed account of two ongoing movements through the incorporation of a number of genres, it enacts a sort of methodological challenge appropriate to its topic. As a result, its reflective double chronicle has not been dated by subsequent events. In January 2018 the Macron government announced that the new airport would not be built at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, though former *zadistes* continue to negotiate with the French authorities over the use of the land. The NoTAV campaign has yet to win anything so definitive from the Italian state. In opposition, the Five Stars Movement gave NoTAV its full backing and won the support of many voters in the region. In office it has so far blocked the tendering process on the Italian side, amid calls for a referendum on the TAV. Since 2011, however, the European Commission has thrown its full weight behind the project—a point missed by Mauvaise Troupe—and 40 per cent of the Lyon–Turin link will be funded by the EU. On the French side of the border there has been no corresponding NoTAV movement and work there has proceeded on schedule.

What insights does Mauvaise Troupe glean from all this for 'the making of a new political intelligence'? *ZAD and NoTAV* offers no portable political programme, no directions for running communal farms, although it suggests a number of exemplary transpositions: *zad* for ZAD, political affinities for power-lines, barricades for farming equipment, precious territory for useless swamp, solidarity for NIMBYism. At the core of this demonstrative rather than programmatic strategy is the alternative internationalism posited by the connection between the *zad* and the NoTAV movements. In both instances, the defence of a territory altered existing forms of sociality and in some cases produced entirely new ones. Nicoletta, the protester on the Seghino Bridge, summarizes the experience in Val di Susa: 'There were

oldsters, people from the popular struggle committee, but there were also many young people who had started to come from elsewhere, because they found here a way to satisfy the need for opposition that they couldn't find anywhere else.'

Yet one strength of Mauvaise Troupe's approach is the careful attention the collective pays to the distinctions between the two campaigns. In Val di Susa, concepts of 'the popular' and 'the people' were self-explanatory. At Notre-Dame-des-Landes, they were distrusted. The idea of a republican people that emerged from the French Revolution was quickly neutralized by the installation of the bourgeoisie, *ZAD and NoTAV* argues, and later 'worked over, stabilized and integrated into a vast system of democratic governance'. A homogenizing fiction, it allowed no internal contradiction, ethical divergence or differential relationship to power. Yet the act of governing also included the capacity to designate and excommunicate 'internal enemies' remobilizing the abstraction of a united people against them. In late 2015, the conjunction of terrorist attacks in Paris and a fresh police assault on the *zad* threw these tensions into relief. As Hollande imposed a state of emergency, the media and political establishment exhorted the 'French people' to identify with the 'Bataclan generation'—'open, hedonistic, flexible'—against 'the terrorists', an enemy that could easily extend to any migrant and all Muslims. No other division could be allowed. As Mauvaise Troupe has it, the *zadistes* and their allies defied Hollande's ban on demonstrations to set out on tractors and bicycles to protest in the spirit of the Communards against the heads of government gathered for the Paris climate summit at Versailles.

ZAD and NoTAV acknowledges the contradictions inherent in the *zad*'s attempts at prefigurative politics: 'The defeat of a police operation will never be enough to destroy what remains of the grip of consumerism within us, the devastating addictions, the prejudices, the everyday sexism.' And yet, actually existing commoning was a reality for almost ten years. The political challenge of living communally, commented upon and recorded throughout the book, is summarized at one point as the 'problem of the one and the multiple'. It is a problem that the authors have no interest in definitively resolving. This generative instability is spatially encoded as well. While there were monthly General Assembly meetings at the Vacherit, there was no designated space for decision-making on the *zad*. The 'composition' of the different 'components' into a 'community of struggle' was not easy to sustain, outside moments of high tension. Often the result was 'conjugated actions', with each group promoting its own chosen tactic: counter-expertise, direct action, non-violence, hunger strike, sabotage. The authors assert that neither a 'democratic imaginary' nor 'the search for a consensus as an ideal' were suited to the political tasks of living on the *zad*. 'Real finesse'

was required if aspirations were to reinforce rather than neutralize each other. There were sharp differences over both sabotage and street violence as tactics, with local inhabitants complaining the occupiers were inviting police repression. Yet attitudes shifted when it came to building barricades against police invasion.

Communal sociality looks different in the Val di Susa, but living in protest is living differently. If there is no autonomous ‘lawless zone’, the landscape still changes for people involved in NoTAV. One member explains the strange appearance of a tourist bus at a TAV construction site: ‘They are Valsusians returning from a seaside outing, but before going back to their homes they come by to scream their rage.’ Here the negotiations between different political cultures involved greater recognition of the other’s point of view. Luca, a young militant, speaks of the importance for the Valsusians of ‘the legitimacy of numbers’. Anarchists would undertake an action with five people, or two. Valsusians ‘are used to being very numerous—thirty or forty thousand for the marches, so if there’s a hundred, they’ll say, “Something isn’t right, where are all the others? If they aren’t here, it means they don’t agree.”’ The idea of legitimacy was hard to define—‘it’s a combination of a sense of justice, the emotion in the moment, and the number of people’—but ‘it’s what guides many of the practices of the Valsusian struggle.’

Sylvia Federici has argued that primitive accumulation should be understood not simply as an early stage of capitalism, but an on-going process. New enclosures have made communal property and relations that were assumed extinct visible once again. Ross suggests that recent examples of robust political organizing are tied to the land through their recognition of the catastrophic climate change that will, as a result of enclosure, make living together on Earth into an impossibility. This makes the commons once again visible and more necessary. *ZAD and NoTAV* is a notable book for this reason. It demonstrates that the defence of a literal, sited commons is at once a refusal of the wealth transfer entailed in state-sponsored land-grabs and a necessary component of maintaining political alternatives by exerting control over the means of social reproduction. A record of lived experience rather than an abstract manifesto, it carries a corresponding degree of conviction. In spite of the absence of an articulated programme, it is also a galvanizing text in its demonstration of the entanglement of militant actions and the reproduction of everyday life. And the presence of multiple, visible voices, rather than the all-knowing anonymity of competing political tracts like the Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection*, is both politically and formally important.

There are, of course, unavoidable questions of representation and the first-person narratives cannot completely displace the suspicion that at least a few things are being misrepresented here. Mauvaise Troupe undertakes

no critical reflection on its own 'components' and their 'composition'. We are told only that the collective has 'varied in number'. Nor is there any attempt to provide a more detailed analysis of the class characters of the regions and the economic relations involved. It is difficult, for example, not to see a conflict between the large and petty bourgeoisie as a much more significant factor in the protest against the airport, and one wonders what impact the presence of occupiers could have on the political consciousness of small-business owners. At the same time, the book is full of astonishing stories, vignettes that may be testaments to the efficacy of commoning as a means of political transformation—a man emerging from a BMW, pulling a chainsaw out of its trunk and asking which tree he should cut down for the barricade, for example. Or a farmer, after working on the *zad*, suddenly finding it bizarre to hear a friend demand that his wife make drinks for them.

The history of militant action in Italy, and broader reactions to it, is also insufficient. It is not a coincidence that the NoTAV struggle is happening near Turin. It would also be useful to know more about the regional political situation in the Loire-Atlantique and the actions taken by ACIPA and the other groups that were waging a war of attrition long before the *zad* was founded. The question of how one maintains a communal life in struggle beyond the moment of conflict or maintains a commune in acute opposition to authorities—in a state of permanent defence—without eventually succumbing to authoritarian tendencies is crucial and an attention to these other, less radical but also less romantic forms of struggle, could be helpful here. But to paraphrase Marx on the Paris Commune, the most significant thing about the *zad* is that it happened, and a record of this happening is good to have.